

Lifelong Learning

A community-university partnership advancing collaboration and community capacity building

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COLLABORATION AND CAPACITY-BUILDING FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

The issues facing communities, particularly urban communities, often elicit demands for action (Baum, 2000) and positive social change. These demands create challenges and opportunities for university-community partnerships grounded in relationship-building processes (Prins, 2005). Addressing the immediate and pressing concerns of communities, while building mutually beneficial relationships requires more than modifying an existing process; it requires innovative solutions based on systems change. The collective impact model offers communities and universities the opportunity to support community capacity building efforts engaging in authentic collaborations that give voice to and empower senior citizens.

A demographic transformation caused by a rapidly aging population is occurring in the United States.

By 2035, older adults are projected to outnumber children for the first time in U.S. history (Vespa). A similar demographic transformation is predicted for the State of Indiana. By 2030, one out of every five people living in Indiana will be a senior (age 65 and older) citizen (Strange, 2018). More than 966,000 senior citizens called Indiana home as of 2015 (the base of the population projections). By 2050, the number of people ages 65 and older will top 1.5 million—a growth of 57 percent from 2015 levels (Strange, 2018). Indiana’s population aged 80 and older is expected to grow even more rapidly, increasing by 121 percent by 2050 (Strange, 2018).

As the population ages, we are faced with policy challenges in a multitude of areas, including creating and supporting an environment for seniors that promotes physical, social, and emotional wellbeing. The public good nature of university education, both formal and informal, fuels dialogue and action benefiting more than the individual student

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or learner. In the case of seniors, aged 55 and above, informal learning, e.g., noncredit lifelong learning, takes on a broader social purpose and contributes to a holistic approach to community development. Therefore, it is incumbent on universities and their stakeholder communities to reflect on the current state of lifelong learning practices, and to understand the needs and wants of a burgeoning senior community. A community-engaged approach to lifelong learning offers a unique opportunity to partner with seniors to co-define the lifelong learning issues of concern and to co-design, co-implement and co-evaluate sustainable educational experiences that maximize the use of both university and community assets for mutual benefit.

This project, part of a much larger community-based research study, explores how to engage seniors, aged 50 and over, in redefining lifelong learning and the role of universities in working with and for senior populations. The study employs the principles of collective impact and the practice of participatory-based research to give voice to those whose wisdom is often pushed aside or at worst ignored. The focus of this project is to share the process used to build a community-university partnership grounded in best practices and inspired by mutual values related to lifelong learning. Future papers will focus on a discussion of research methods and data analysis.

THE BENEFITS OF LIFELONG LEARNING

The term “lifelong” and its application to learning has been used for over 25 years (Laal, 2012). The concept of lifelong learning is not well understood (Lamb, 2011). This form of learning takes place both in informal and formal settings, and is provided by nonprofit, private, and public institutions including university-community partnerships focused on advancing educational opportunities. For the purposes of this study lifelong learning refers to the Senior University program offered by

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IU Northwest through the Center for Urban and Regional Excellence, the campus’ community-university partnership center.

In the past 20 years, the literature on the benefits of lifelong learning has grown significantly (Coleman, 2017). The social and community benefits of lifelong learning include those of asset-based thinking and creative expression (Pstross, 2017), as well as a sense of ownership and sustained relationships (Brady, 2013). In addition, studies have shown that older learners generally report positive wellbeing and healthy lifestyles, i.e., non-smoking and regular exercise (Narushima, 2018). Given the beneficial effects of participation in organized adult education programs on life satisfaction, older learners are encouraged to be engaged in more learning activities (Yamashita, 2017).

While the literature on the benefits of lifelong learning is substantial, the literature on lifelong learning institutions, centers and programs is wanting in comparison (Talmage, 2018). In this area, much of the research is focused on the work of one of the most well-known community-university partnerships offering senior lifelong learning experiences - the Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes (OLLI). These institutes are housed on over 100 university campuses. Through

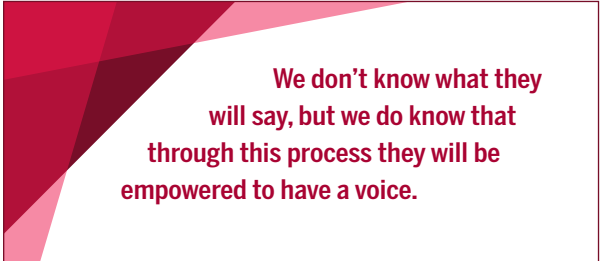
OLLI programs, seniors participate in non-credit learning opportunities that don't require homework but do mirror the academic classroom experience (Hensley, 2012). The research on OLLI and its programs confirms the importance of understanding how institutions engage in lifelong learning and the value in connecting the theory and practice of community engagement to improving the quality of life of seniors and our communities. This study begins to fill a gap in this literature by exploring a collaborative process used to give voice to seniors in designing and implementing lifelong learning initiatives.

SENIOR UNIVERSITY: THE IU NORTHWEST EXPERIENCE

The Center for Urban and Regional Excellence (CURE) at Indiana University Northwest engages the University and the community in the creation of positive, sustainable, and impactful programs and initiatives. CURE works collaboratively with organizations in all sectors to promote continued learning, solution-based interaction, and mutually beneficial partnerships in our communities.

An important element of CURE's work within the community centers on fulfilling the mission of Senior University. For two decades, seniors have participated in and benefited from programs providing educational, social, and engaged learning opportunities to seniors, persons aged 55 and over, residing in Northwest Indiana communities. Residing originally in the campus' continuing education program, the responsibility for designing and delivering Senior University was integrated into CURE in 2012. The programs transition into CURE set the stage for the transformation of a service-based program into one founded on the principles of community engagement – mutual benefit and reciprocity.

Informed by the collective impact model of community transformation, CURE undertook a



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critical examination of existing programming, evaluating the diversity and scope of learning experiences as well as the demographics of participants. The examination began with the informal discussions with program participants, instructors and community members as well as a review of course evaluations. While most participants reported high levels of satisfaction with program offerings, responses to questions soliciting input and ideas for future offerings was limited. It was clear there was a need for a more formal assessment of the senior community's needs and desires in order to create a program that is mutually beneficial and reciprocal.

Collective Impact as a framework for system change

The collective impact framework was identified as a viable model for effecting the type of system change needed to realize positive change in the senior community. Improving lifelong learning opportunities for seniors will require a coordinated/collaborative effort of multiple organizations. The collective impact model is driven by relationships among organizations and their shared objectives (Kania, Winter 2011), thus, its potential as a framework for change was significant. For this reason, CURE assessed the viability of the collective impact approach using the Collective Impact Feasibility framework.

The feasibility framework poses a set of questions addressing the complexity and the scale of the social problem. (FSG, 2015) The approach encour-

ages consideration of the community context and when applied helps to identify opportunity areas for investment and support. (FSG, 2015) CURE's evaluation of readiness under the feasibility framework affirmed the viability of the collective impact model for addressing the community's need for improved lifelong learning opportunities, currently provided by a fragmented set of organizations, whose collaboration would improve the senior community's wellbeing.

The first step, in moving toward a collaborative model was to assess the effectiveness of our program. Early in 2018, CURE conducted two Senior University listening sessions, inviting individuals aged 55 and older and organizations working with seniors to share their views on community needs related to lifelong learning. A press release published in the local news was accompanied by social media announcements. Organizational representatives and individuals attended the focus group sessions. In these sessions, seniors discussed the positive and negative aspects of Senior University programming and offered insights on a future direction. Most significantly, they expressed interest in forming a steering committee composed of community representatives to assist CURE in co-visioning lifelong learning initiatives.

Over the past 18 months, the Senior University Steering Committee, collective of seniors representing a variety of life and professional experiences as well as sectors (private, public and nonprofit), embraced the challenge of "re-inventing" lifelong learning and changed the model of decision making. Steering committee members engaged with their existing networks to get the "pulse" of the community on learning needs. They promoted existing programming

and supported CURE by volunteering their time to learn more about participatory-based research processes, setting the stage for later work. CURE provided the steering committee members with opportunities for learning and growth. Steering committee members presented at an IU Northwest Chancellor's Board of Advisors meeting in 2019 and attended the 2020 Indiana Campus Compact Summit to learn more about community-university engagement.

Over the past one-and-a-half years, the foundation for cross-sector relationships was built. Each of the steering committee members serves as a liaison to a network of similarly-concerned individuals in the private, nonprofit, and public sectors. It is a small, but necessary step to building a more comprehensive and collaborative approach to lifelong learning in the region. While CURE continues to work to foster trust, we also continue to build capacity. The steering committee has determined that it would like to engage in participatory-based research on the question of seniors' perception of lifelong learning needs. They are obtaining their Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) certificate.¹ They are co-designing with the researcher a survey instrument and will soon be trained in qualitative research methods, e.g., focus groups.

Moving from Transactional to Transformational Relationships

Community-university relationships must be both fluid and ever-evolving. Approximately 20 years ago, prior to the move by higher education institutions to embrace community engagement, the Senior University program IU Northwest was a service-oriented transactional model of

¹The Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) is an online training program used to train all individuals conducting research that involves human or animal subjects. CITI training courses are in the areas of research, ethics, responsible conduct of research and other related topics.

lifelong learning. In such a model, the basis of the relationship is exchange and the end goal is satisfaction with the exchange. Seniors attended workshops and special events and were enriched by these experiences. These transaction-based interactions satisfied seniors' immediate needs to see a performance, partake in art projects or learn about Gary, Indiana's history. However, unlike transformative partnerships, they did not focus on mutually increasing aspirations or arousing a need for larger meaning. Transactional relationships are short-term and transformative relationships are long-term. Transactional relationships are project-based as opposed to issue-based (Shalabi, 2013). Under a transactional relationship the parties work within the existing system while transformative relationships establish new systems (Enos & Morton, 2003).

The move from a transactional to a transformative relationship between CURE and the senior community is in its early stages. By building community capacity, e.g., training community members in participatory research, the seniors will be empowered to lead as well as follow. It is hoped that this approach and its benefits for both the community and the campus will be enthusiastically shared. It may generate increased interest and participation in program design,

implementation and evaluation within the steering committee and across the sectors represented by committee members. The next stage of the initiative, i.e., finalizing the co-designed survey and the subsequent data collection and analysis will deliver insights not only on the role of universities in supporting senior learning communities but also the vision of seniors learning experiences. We don't know what they will say, but we do know that through this process they will be empowered to have a voice.

In order to develop effective partnerships a shift in educational structures and culture may be required. The moves away from traditional deficit-based models in which universities attempt to fix problems through one-off projects and activities to asset-based models creates new ways of working together (Guskey, 2000). This then opens the space for empowerment and sets the stage for collective impact. Higher education in collaboration with seniors and senior-focused organizations can develop experiences that reflect the needs and desires of seniors while honoring the roles of faculty, staff and students. The changing nature of university-community partnerships demands that transformative partnerships be valued, encouraged and supported to facilitate the scholarship of discovery and application while contributing positively to community wellbeing.

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